DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 221 TE 002 805

AUTHOR May, Charles E.
TITLE Teaching Organic Unity: An Example Based on "The Ball," a Poem by David Ramirez.
PUB DATE Dec 71
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT California English Journal; v7 n4 p44-49 December 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Critical Reading; *English Instruction; Evaluation Techniques; Instructional Aids; *Literary Analysis; *Literary Genres; Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

The way in which analysis of a poem can increase the student's enjoyment of it is illustrated and discussed. The teacher is offered one short poem, written by a fifth grade student, which can be used as an exercise in poem analysis. It is believed that the poem analyzed, "The Ball," which is comprised of 11 words, is effective as an introduction to poetry at various levels; is an illustration of Joyce's notion of epiphany; and is a practical example of Coleridge's definition of a legitimate poem. Through use of such an analysis, it is believed that the student is more easily introduced to what he is looking for when he reads a poem, what kind of pleasure the poem might give him, and how he can compound that pleasure. (DB)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

California English Journal
Vol. 7, No. 4, December 1971.

ED 059221

Teaching Organic Unity: An Example Based on "The Ball," a Poem by David Ramirez

CHARLES E. MAY
California State College, Long Beach

TE 002 805

Once the teacher overcomes the student's initial resistance to poetry by showing him that reading poetry can be a pleasure, he then confronts perhaps the even more obstinate student prejudice that analysis of the poem destroys the new found pleasure. "We murder to dissect," the student echoes, and he begins to doubt the purpose of the literature class. "Why," he asks, "do I have to learn to interpret a poem? Why don't you just leave me alone and let me enjoy it?" The teacher is then relegated to the status of a walking footnote who can explain certain "hard" words, say something about the poet's life and times, and perhaps offer an abstract statement of "meaning."

The student's questions — "Why do I have to analyze a poem? Why can't I just read it and enjoy it?" — are perhaps based on one of the following misconceptions about the reading experience: (1) He still believes that literature is merely entertainment, something to pass the time, different from television only in that it depends more on language

Copyright 1971 by the California Association of Teachers of English.

than on images. (2) He feels that the intuitive effect the poem has on him does not require analysis, that analysis destroys the intuition, that analysis is an academic exercise which is engaged in only by teachers. To counteract both these misconceptions, the teacher must ask the student to clarify the two key words in the questions: *enjoy* — what kind of enjoyment does one receive from a poem? and *analyze* — just what does one do when he analyzes a poem?

Discussion of the two terms might lead to a view of the literary work which the student should be quite willing to accept, for it is actually a view "against interpretation," recommended by critics from Samuel Coleridge to Susan Sontag. First, the pleasure we receive from a work of art, although part of it is the recognition of a universal experience, is primarily an aesthetic pleasure. It results from our perception that the poem is a carefully and imaginatively organized thing — the very thing that it is, not any other thing it might have been. Second, when we analyze a poem, we are not primarily trying to discover what the poem means, although we *are* concerned with meaning, but trying to describe what the poem *is*. We certainly do not wish to destroy the original intuition or pleasure, but rather to deepen it, to account for the pleasure and create more pleasure. As Stephen Hero describes it in Joyce's early novel, after the initial perception that the art object is an integral thing, then comes analysis: "The mind considers the object in whole and in part, in relation to itself and to other objects, examines the balance of its parts, contemplates the form of the object, traverses every cranny of the structure." Only after analysis does the "soul" or "whatness" of the object "leap to us from the vestment of its appearance." Only then does the object achieve its "epiphany."

Of course it is much easier to discuss these concepts abstractly than it is to convince the student of their efficacy. Thus, to get to my major purpose here, I wish to offer the teacher one short poem which he might find helpful in illustrating the kind of pleasure a poem gives and how analysis furthers that pleasure. I have used the poem several times in the last two years in various classes and at various levels as an introduction to poetry, as an illustration of Joyce's notion of epiphany, and as a practical example of Coleridge's definition of a legitimate poem. It has never failed to make its point and to make it better than any other short poem I have tried. It is for the sake of the poem that this short note was written.

I discovered this poem two years ago when my wife brought home a handful of fifth grade papers and announced: "I asked my class to write poems today. Why don't you take a look at them." I took the stack with all the enthusiasm such a request deserves and perfunctorily looked through them. They were the usual childish outpourings, mostly parodies,

imitative of familiar verse and Saturday morning television fare. Then one page stopped me. It was the following poem in crabbed scrawl by David Ramirez, age ten:

A ball is
    a round
and
    a fat
thing
    and
bump

I felt what Coleridge must have felt when he first heard Wordsworth read his poetry — that this was true poetry, that this was Imagination, that it was a legitimate poem. I no sooner felt this than I sought to understand it. Such a reaction was the beginning of Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy, and it is the beginning of any reader's confrontation with a poem that affects him. I then tested the poem against Coleridge's own definition and found it adequate on all counts. According to Coleridge, if a poem is a true poem, a product of Imagination rather than Fancy; it should measure up to the following criteria:

(1) It should have a predominant idea or emotion that unifies it.
(2) One should not be able to separate its materials without destroying its effect.
(3) It should contain in itself the reason it is so and not otherwise.
(4) It should please not by its separate parts, nor by one's final understanding of its action or theme; but by "the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself."

First of all, the most obvious thing we can say about this little poem is that it is a definition. But we know too that it is not a conventional one. A more scientific and truthful definition might be: "A ball is a spheroid, usually with elastic power." But as Coleridge says, "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth." We know that the poem gives us immediate pleasure. And it is that pleasure which, through analysis we wish to account for and deepen. Coleridge further makes a distinction between poetry and other verbal forms that have pleasure as their object by suggesting that the poem proposes to itself "such delight from the *whole,* as is compatible with a distant gratification from each component part." Thus, it is the *whole* poem, its organized composite structure, which gives us pleasure; and it is the *whole* poem we wish to consider.

To discover the predominant idea or emotion that unifies the poem,

we visualize the dramatic situation of a small child with a ball in his hands. The child knows the name of the object and considers the qualities that compose it. He discovers in his hands that it is "round"; he squeezes it and discovers that it is "fat." Having determined these qualities, he pronounces it a "thing" indeed. But then, quite by accident, he discovers the third quality — a quality that completes his definition and delights him. He drops the ball, and hearing the sound it makes, discovers the quality "bump." And it is of course this third quality that makes balls the great fun they are — a quality that does not exist in the static tactile characteristics of the ball, such as its shape, size, or texture; but that exists only in dynamic action.

The important thing that distinguishes this poem from a verbal structure which attempts a true definition of a ball is that a definition is usually posed after the discovery has taken place and the definer has had time to assess. The poem, however, attempts to recreate the actual process of discovery in the very choice and arrangement of the words so that the reader might not simply know the definition but participate in its discovery. That the choice and arrangement of the words in this poem is the most perfectly adjusted to achieve that participation can be demonstrated by comparing it with other possible alternatives: (I have arranged the following alternate structures linearly simply to save space. If you choose to use them on a chalk-board, it would be best to put them in roughly the same spatial arrangement as the original.)

(1) "A ball is a round fat thing that bounces." The word "bounces" suggests an after-the-fact conclusion and the poem loses the dramatic impact of the final single syllable sound.

(2) "A ball is round and fat and goes bump." The verb "goes" also indicates thought after the fact and again the poem loses its action and drama.

Such a comparison with other possible arrangements of the poem is also the best way to illustrate the most important point of this lesson — that it is the precise word choice and arrangement of the poem that makes it pleasurable and that analysis, instead of destroying this pleasure, serves to deepen it.

(3) "A ball is a round and fat thing and thump." "Thump" is the sound a dropped thing might make, but not a "round" thing. "Bump" forces the mouth into the same round shape the ball is. It is also an alliterative echo of the same round sound the word "ball" makes and thus unifies the poem.

(4) "A ball is a big round thing and bump." *or* "A ball is a thick round thing and bump." "Fat" is a better word here than either "big" or "thick" because it suggests both these qualities and gives us a more concrete sense of texture. The word "fat" suggests the nice delicious fatness of a fat person. The ball is one of those solid rubber balls one can squeeze between his hands.

(5) "A ball is round and fat and bump." To leave out "thing" is to miss part of the child's discovery — that the ball is a thing in fact. It also speeds up the rhythm of the poem by making the two articles — "*a* round and *a* fat" — unnecessary. The rhythm of the original emphasizes the methodical discovery of the tactile characteristics. It also makes the final "bump" sound more dramatic — a nice little shock in the boy and in the reader.

Finally, to make the most minor change possible in the poem, to shift the second "a" from before "fat" to before "bump," would alter the effect of the poem.

(6) "A ball is a round and fat thing and a bump." Again, we see the loss of the dramatic quality and impact of the final abrupt sound. We also realize that "bump" cannot be "*a* bump." It is not a concrete quality that can be observed in a thing, such as "*a* fat" or "*a* round," but a quality that exists only in action. "Bump" is not "*a* bump." It must always be just "bump."

These exercises in analysis should be pleasurable in themselves, should increase the student's delight in the poem, and should dispel his fears that "We murder to dissect." Using a poem by a ten year old child might also effectively counteract other typical student fallacies about reading a poem; for example, the intentional fallacy. In this poem, the poet simply intended to write a poem. He had no ulterior motives, no preconceived plan, no secret symbolism. He instinctively wanted to create an experience, and he did it perfectly. The poem might also help dismiss the common student prejudice that poems have a "deeper meaning" which only the initiated know the secret of finding, as well as his suspicion that there is a statement somewhere hidden in the poem which it is his job to discover.

I have found the poem much more effective in dispelling these prejudices than any other short poem I have used for an introduction to poetry. Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" requires too much external knowledge about the basic image. Blake's "The Sick Rose" requires too much knowledge about Blake's philosophic system. William Carlos Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow" is much too personal and limited

to communicate effectively. Of course, I do not claim that once the student has mastered "A Ball," he will automatically be ready for Auden, Eliot, and Pound; for certainly, the experiences great poets attempt to create are often more complex and subtle than the experience of David Ramirez, age ten. But I do think that this poem might more easily introduce the student to just what he is looking for when he reads a poem, what kind of pleasure the poem might give him, and how he can compound that pleasure. Finally it might make him see what an ultimately mysterious thing a poem is and what a wonderful thing is the poet — even at age ten.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY CHAS. E. MAY AND "CALIF. ENGL. JOURNAL" TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."